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ABSTRACT

In an era of organizational restructuring and technological change, individuals can no longer plan on spending their entire working lives with one organization. Career paths are no longer a linear rise up the ladder. Adult career counselors deal with an extremely heterogeneous population who are at vastly different stages of life. Their clients' career issues are complicated by family responsibilities and work and life experiences that color their attitudes, values, and decisions. Counselors must be familiar with adult development and adult learning theories and need varied approaches for these different types of clients. Because careers are integral to identity in this culture, adult career counseling becomes an exploration of personal identity and meaning--issues different for men and women. The rise in the number of dual-career couples has given a new focus to counseling--the link between work and family life for both men and women. Another trend affecting career counseling is the expansion of life choices for older adults. Greater attention is finally being given to cross-cultural issues. Counseling diverse clients should take into account three factors: similarities across cultures; unique aspects of cultures that influence members; and individual characteristics. Appropriate assessment must include problem identification, assessment of coping responses, and use of subjective information. Assessment also has gender and cultural dimensions. (Contains 13 references.) (YLB)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

Adult Career Counseling in a New Age

by Sandra Kerka

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The changing workplace—a by-now familiar litany of economic, demographic, organizational, and social changes—has made ambiguity the only certainty in work life. Many adults had little or no career education, guidance, or counseling when they were "in school" and often seek such help now, making job or career changes spurred by their personal stage of development or by the "postmodern" workplace. Although career development is a continuous lifelong process, "media and some scholars continue to dramatize crisis in midlife" (Lea and Leibowitz 1992, p. 8). Crises and transitions can occur at any period, however. Hoyt and Lester (1995) found that the career needs of adults aged 18-25 are particularly not being met. The issues and implications of career counseling for adults in the kaleidoscopic context of today's workplace are the focus of this *Digest*.

An Adult Perspective on Career Counseling

In this era of organizational restructuring and technological change, individuals can no longer plan on spending their entire working lives with one organization. Life no longer follows a linear path: schooling, work, retirement. Career paths, too, are no longer a linear rise up the ladder to the top. Some analysts proclaim the "new rules of work": everyone is self-employed and the concept of "job" is disappearing (Hall and Mirvis 1995). Such fundamental changes mean that people need more help than ever with career issues. However, a recent survey of 1,046 adults (Hoyt and Lester 1995) showed that 40% would turn to family or friends first; 37% to counselors. Only 30% had discussed career choices with school or college counselors; only 36% had made a conscious career choice or plan; and, for 47%, the primary sources of career information were television, magazines, and newspapers.

Unlike counselors of high school or traditional-age college students, adult career counselors deal with an extremely heterogeneous population who are at vastly different stages of life (Lea and Leibowitz 1992). Their clients' career issues are complicated by family responsibilities and work and life experiences that color their attitudes, values, and decisions. Some may already have made the decision to change, have a great deal of self-knowledge, and need information or assistance in coping with the new context of job search. Others may have drifted into their jobs with little planning or guidance, have difficulty making decisions, and lack awareness of their skills, abilities, and interests. Some may be self-directed learners who just need to be pointed in the right direction; others may want to be given the answer to their career conundrum in a structured way.

Clearly, counselors must be familiar with adult development and adult learning theories and need varied approaches for these different types of clients. They can guide adult clients in mining their life experiences as a source of career information. For experienced clients who already know what they don't want, traditional resources such as the ***Dictionary of Occupational Titles*** or ***Occupational Outlook Handbook*** may be of little help. Washington (1993) suggests broadening their occupational horizons by identifying the special knowledge and technical skills they already possess, using job families instead of traditional clusters (e.g., outdoor jobs, jobs with exotic locations, jobs that use certain skills), and writing results-oriented resumes that describe work projects and results.

Gender Issues and Dual Careers

Because careers are integral to identity in this culture, adult career counseling becomes an exploration of personal identity and meaning (Davidson and Gilbert 1993). These issues are different for men and women; in this culture, "having a career is a consequence of being male" (ibid., p. 150). Often, men make other life choices to accommodate career requirements, and job loss can be a blow to their identity. Despite recent social changes, women's career development remains entangled with family issues, role conflict, sex discrimination, and harassment (Lea and Leibowitz 1992). Counselors must recognize what is unique about women's career development and help them expand options, remembering that individual women differ from one another as well as from men (ibid.). Men's choices are also constricted by gender role restrictions. Counselors can help male clients examine their gender and career socialization and find other ways to validate their identity than traditional narrow definitions (ibid.).

The rise in the number of dual-career couples has given a new focus to counseling approaches. Traditional counseling had an individual focus; now, counseling is incomplete if it fails to take into account the link between work and family life for both men and women. Career assessment for couples must include evaluation of the influences of gender-role beliefs, consideration of the interaction between the partners, and recognition of social policies that still favor the separation of work and family and the gendered division of labor. In "conjoint" career counseling (Lea and Leibowitz 1992), the individual career stage of each partner and the family stage of the couple must be considered.

Counseling for the Third Age

Another trend affecting career counseling is the expansion of life choices for older adults. The phenomenon of early retirement, especially among white males, the recognition that many older adults still want to work, and longer life spans and better health that make them still able to work necessitate preparing for the "Third Age"—"that period of life beyond the career job and parenting which can last for anything up to 30 years" (Curnow and Fox 1993, p. ix). Midlife and older adults must deal with a number of concerns, such as skill obsolescence, age discrimination, and lack of experience with current technology. They may have to cope with feelings of loss and change, whether their job change or retirement is voluntary or involuntary. Counselors can help them envision and plan for their future life style and keep them open to new opportunities. One strategy that has proven effective with mature job seekers is the job club. Rife and Belcher (1993) found that positive social support for the job search increased the intensity of the search for unemployed adults over 50; more important, the support of other unemployed friends had a more positive effect than that of family or employed friends. The job search club thus serves as an effective network of information exchange and social support for others adrift in the same boat of midlife transition.

Career Counseling and Diversity

Greater attention is finally being given to cross-cultural issues in career counseling. The life and work experiences of ethnic minorities, including immigrants, may have been quite different from the mainstream, and minorities (as do women) experience

culture-specific constraints and barriers that affect career development (Marsella and Leong 1995). The meaning of work and career are social and cultural constructions, not universal concepts. Counseling diverse clients should take into account three factors: similarities across cultures, unique aspects of cultures that influence members, and individual characteristics. The application of Western career development theories and norms to non-Western persons may lead to erroneous assumptions and ineffective practice.

Marsella and Leong recommend locating the individual client on a continuum of ethnocultural identity, identifying the relative importance of personal or cultural characteristics to an individual. For example, for a fully acculturated person, personality may be more relevant to career development, whereas for a more traditional individual, the cultural dimension has more influence. Prince et al. (1991) offer some guidelines for working with multicultural clients: (1) assess comfort/familiarity with counseling and how it is viewed in client culture; (2) consider cultural attitudes toward authority; (3) is the culture group or individually based?; (4) how are people socialized toward gender, family, and work roles?; and (5) be sensitive to such barriers as discrimination, lack of nontraditional role models, and limited information resources.

Appropriate Assessment

Just as adult educators must be cautious in selecting tests for adult learners, counselors must ensure that career assessment instruments used with adult clients are appropriate. Counseling of high school or college students typically concentrates on decision making and career choice. Although adults may be dealing with these issues, the new workplace context confronts them with the additional problems of career adaptation, and the focus of adult counseling is on identifying the problems and assessing coping responses (Savickas 1992). Career assessment often emphasizes quantitative measures that evaluate interests, abilities, and traits and objectively identify realistic occupational alternatives. With adults at transitional points in their lives that have caused them to seek counseling, counselors act as interpreters of "lives in progress rather than as actuaries who count interests and abilities" (ibid., p. 338). Adding subjective information derived from examination of life themes takes into account adults' multiple, nonwork roles that are highly influential on and interdependent with career. Qualitative methods include autobiographies, early recollections, and structured interviews on vocational and educational experiences.

Appropriate assessment also has gender and cultural dimensions. Many measures normed on high school students may not be appropriate for adults; similarly, those normed on whites only or white males only may be invalid for women and diverse populations. Studies are beginning to test the validity of such instruments as the Self-Directed Search and the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory across different groups (Marsella and Leong 1995). Other considerations are the language of the instrument (some have been translated, but the validity of the translations must be evaluated) and test-taking response or attitude (is the client responding according to cultural norms or expectations?) (Prince et al. 1991). Fouad and Spreda (1995) offer the following guidelines for using interest inventories with women and minorities: (1) increase counselor self-knowledge to avoid interpretation bias; (2) avoid making assumptions—there are individual variations in ethnic identity, acculturation, and worldview; (3) include the client in interpretation; (4) test clients in languages they know; and (5) use multiple measures.

Adult Career Counseling in Practice

"One-stop career centers" being developed in 16 states with federal funding are intended to bring together comprehensive, integrated career services—such as information on job training, education programs, and financial assistance; local labor market information; skills assessment and counseling—in accessible locations such as libraries and malls (Dykman 1995). State-of-the-art technology, such as CD-ROMs and computer networks, is emphasized. Community outreach and technology are also important features of Oakland University's Adult Career Counseling Center, which provides free computer-assisted career guidance and counseling services using such tools as System of Interactive Guidance and Information Plus and DISCOVER for Adults (Splete and Hoffman 1994).

In summary, adult career counselors should be aware of the following:

- the new conditions of work and the impact of constant change and uncertainty
- family systems theory and the relationship between family and work
- adult development and adult learning
- different approaches for different client groups—dual career couples, older adults, women, ethnic groups
- selection and use of appropriate career assessment instruments

They should recognize that the "new career contract" (Hall and Mirvis 1995) signals a shift from organizational to individual careers and strive to help adults develop internal criteria for success that enable them to achieve self-fulfillment in any domain, paid or unpaid.

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